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SUBJECT: HIZBALLAH AND THE HOUTHIS: DIFFERENT GOALS AND  
IDEOLOGY

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Classified By: Ambassador Stephen Seche for reasons 1.4(b) and (d).

11. (C) SUMMARY. In their ongoing pursuit of Western support for their struggle against the Houthis, ROYG officials have latched onto recent, unsubstantiated media claims of Hizballah cooperation with the Houthis in Sa'ada in order to bolster their argument that the Houthis are a terrorist organization. However, such arguments ignore the cultural and ideological differences between Hizballah and the Houthi rebels and, thus, the unlikelihood that they would work together. Furthermore, the Houthis could more accurately be characterized as a movement with religious undertones and politically addressable grievances rather than a radical, religiously motivated sect with which the ROYG cannot negotiate. Even their demands for greater religious freedom could be addressed through political means. While the possibility remains that practical reasons could trump ideological differences, especially in light of recent regionalization of the conflict, no solid evidence has been shown of Hizballah activity in Sa'ada or of any desire on the part of the Houthis for such a partnership. END SUMMARY.

12. (C) As tensions continue to rise in the Sa'ada conflict between ROYG forces and the Houthis, ROYG officials and government-owned media, with an eye towards securing Western support, have ramped up statements asserting that the Houthis have joined forces with Hizballah (reftel). Claiming that the Houthis and Hizballah share a common ideology and goals, the ROYG argues that the USG should view the Houthis as a terrorist organization on par with Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP). However, considering the ideological and political differences between the Houthis and Hizballah, such broad generalizations lack factual foundations.

WHO ARE THE HOUTHIS?  
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13. (C) The Houthis, springing from a more moderate Zaydi Shi'a tradition, are characterized by a greater loyalty to the Zaydi tribe rather than to the broader Shi'a religion, and attract members based on political beliefs and grievances held by the community in which they have historically lived. Hizballah is a radical Shi'a group which has committed terrorist acts. When questioned about the ideological affinities between the Houthis and Hizballah, Majid al-Fahed, a well-connected Sa'ada local and director of Yemeni NGO Civic Democratic Foundation, said they each represent completely different strands of the Shi'a faith. Fahed added that the Houthis are more inspired by political grievances than by religious differences with the central government.

This evaluation of the Houthi movement has been echoed repeatedly by other Sa'ada locals, including during discussions PolOff held on September 2 with Sa'ada tribesmen, who characterized the Houthis as a "social and political movement" rather than a religiously or ideologically motivated movement. According to Abdullah al-Mua'id, Sa'ada local and Ministry of Local Administration official, the Houthis' primary goal is "convincing the central government to give more authority to the local levels...but not actual independence from Yemen."

¶4. (C) Members of the ROYG, however, continue to characterize the Houthis as a radical Shi'a group that takes issue with the government for sectarian reasons rather than for legitimate political grievances and, as such, finds a logical ideological partner in Hizballah. Ministry of Defense Chief of Staff Major General Ahmed al-Ashwal told PolOff on September 14 that the Houthis "are the same as Iran, the same as Hizballah; they share the same doctrine and ideology." Foreign Minister Abubakr al-Qirbi told the Ambassador on September 7 that the Houthis clearly were not fighting for political grievances as they had failed to delineate what they want from the ROYG, but were instead fighting for a vague and radical ideology. (NOTE. The Houthis have issued a number of statements listing their grievances, which include adherence to a previously negotiated Doha agreement and the payment of promised reconstruction funds to Sa'ada inhabitants for damage inflicted by ROYG forces during previous rounds of fighting. END NOTE.)

¶5. (C) When questioned about the source of the Houthis' ideology, Deputy Foreign Minister Muhi al-Dhabbi told PolOff on Oct 17, "These religious extremes (Houthis and AQAP) are new in Yemen. We have a very moderate religious tradition.

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It,s the Wahhabism from outside that,s created al-Qaeda, the twelver Shiism from Lebanon and Iran that has inspired the Houthis," explaining that Yemenis traditionally belong to either a moderate brand of Zaydi (Shiite) faith, including President Saleh, or moderate Shafi (Sunni) faith. (NOTE. The Houthis identify themselves as members of a moderate Zaydi Shi'a community historically present in Sa'ada. END NOTE.) Some Arab academics have actually argued the opposite: that Zaydi Shiism does not stem from external radicalizing influences, but that it is an indigenous political movement. A July 2009 article by Abdullah Lux in the academic journal Contemporary Arab Affairs concludes, through numerous interviews with Houthi leaders and analysis of statements from Abdul Malik al-Houthi, that the Zaydi discourse connected to the Houthi movement is actually distinct from the Twelver Shiism practiced in Iran and among Lebanese Hizballah members and that there is a "lack of evidence of direct support (to the Houthis) by either Hizballah or Iran."

#### HOUTHIS AND HIZBALLAH: DIFFERENT SHI'A STRAINS

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¶6. (C) Zaydi Shiism departs from the Shiism practiced in Lebanon, where Hizballah has drawn many of its supporters, in a number of significant areas. Most notably, Zaydis do not recognize the legitimacy of the last 7 of the 12 historic imams of mainstream Shiism prominent in Lebanon. Instead, the Zaydis recognize only the first 5 imams and then follow a line of succession they can trace down to their very own tribe, which culminated in the last Zaydi imam to rule Sana'a until the republican coup of 1962. ROYG officials have often used this fact to argue that the Houthis desire an overthrow of the central government and a reinstatement of the Imamate; however, the Houthis have never stipulated such a desire.

¶7. (C) The Houthis have, however, demanded greater autonomy in the religious texts used and the religious teachings presented in their schools. The Ministry of Religious Endowments has centralized control over curriculum, requiring all schools to teach one version of national religious

education. While the ROYG has paid lip-service to religious freedom, as guaranteed in the constitution, there have been increased restrictions on religious expression as the conflict in Sa'ada has worsened. There are known cases of Zaydi Shi'a imams being removed and replaced with Sunni imams in northern mosques, and the ROYG continues to refuse license requests from Zaydi schools. Among their list of political grievances, the Houthis have stipulated greater religious freedom as a requirement for peace; but this is one among many purely political objections to the ROYG and one that could be addressed through political means under the constitution. Ultimately, the religious underpinnings of the Houthis have less to do with the movement than does the weakness of the central government in the north and the refusal of the ROYG to address grievances long-held by the inhabitants of northern governorates.

#### HIZBALLAH FOUNDATIONS POINT TO IRAN

18. (C) While the Houthis have never expressed regional ambitions, limiting their political goals to Yemen, Hizballah has openly used both Lebanon and Syria as staging grounds for anti-Israel offensives and has received substantial support from Iran for its activities. Hizballah was founded in response to the Israeli invasion of Lebanon during the Lebanese civil war in 1982. According to Adam Shatz's influential 2004 article on Hizballah's founding, its leaders were inspired by Ayatollah Khomeini and its militia members were trained by the Iranian Revolutionary Guard. Iran has continued to provide Hizballah with funds and weapons, including Katyusha rockets, which have been fired at Israeli targets on numerous occasions. U.S. media and UN reports from as early as 2002 have documented Iran's material and training support for Hizballah, with some estimates as high as USD 50-60 million annually.

19. (C) Leaving potential religious differences aside, speculation remains that the Houthi-Hizballah partnership may be advantageous from a logistical perspective. On October 6, Faris al-Saqqaf, director of the local think tank Center for Future Studies and confidante of President Saleh's son Ahmed Ali, told PolOff, "It is easy for Yemenis to travel to Damascus; they don't even need a visa. From there, the Houthis go to Lebanon for Hizballah training, this is for sure. Maybe they even go to Iran, but definitely to Lebanon." Hizballah, which is reportedly seeking rocket-propelled grenades (RPGs) to use against Israeli aircraft, could be seeking training opportunities with

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anti-aircraft artillery in northern Yemen where they could avoid detection and the severe retaliation they would face in Lebanon if the Israelis discovered their operations. Adam Shatz, Hizballah analyst and literary editor of The Nation, has noted that Iran's former foreign minister, Kamal Kharazi, urged Hassan Nasrallah, Hizballah's leader, to refrain from activities that may give Israel an excuse to invade Lebanon. On the other hand, Fahed points out the unlikelihood that the Houthis would agree to such influence from Hizballah, pointing to their fierce independence: "The Houthis would not accept the outside influence of Hizballah. Tribes don't even want to be influenced by the central government or other tribes in Yemen."

#### COMMENT

10. (C) ROYG officials have repeatedly attempted to convince the USG to classify the Houthi rebels as a terrorist organization, first by alleging AQAP connections, then ambiguous "Iranian influence," and now by claiming Hizballah collaboration. Although we cannot exclude that Hizballah may desire joint training with the Houthis for logistical reasons, a Hizballah-Houthi alliance remains unlikely due to deep-seated cultural and ideological differences and the lack of international ambitions on the part of the Houthis. Furthermore, no solid evidence has been shown of Hizballah

activity in Sa'ada. The Houthis have never mentioned any partnership with Hizballah, perhaps recognizing that evidence of such an alliance would substantiate the ROYG's argument that the Houthis are part of an international terrorist network. END COMMENT.  
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